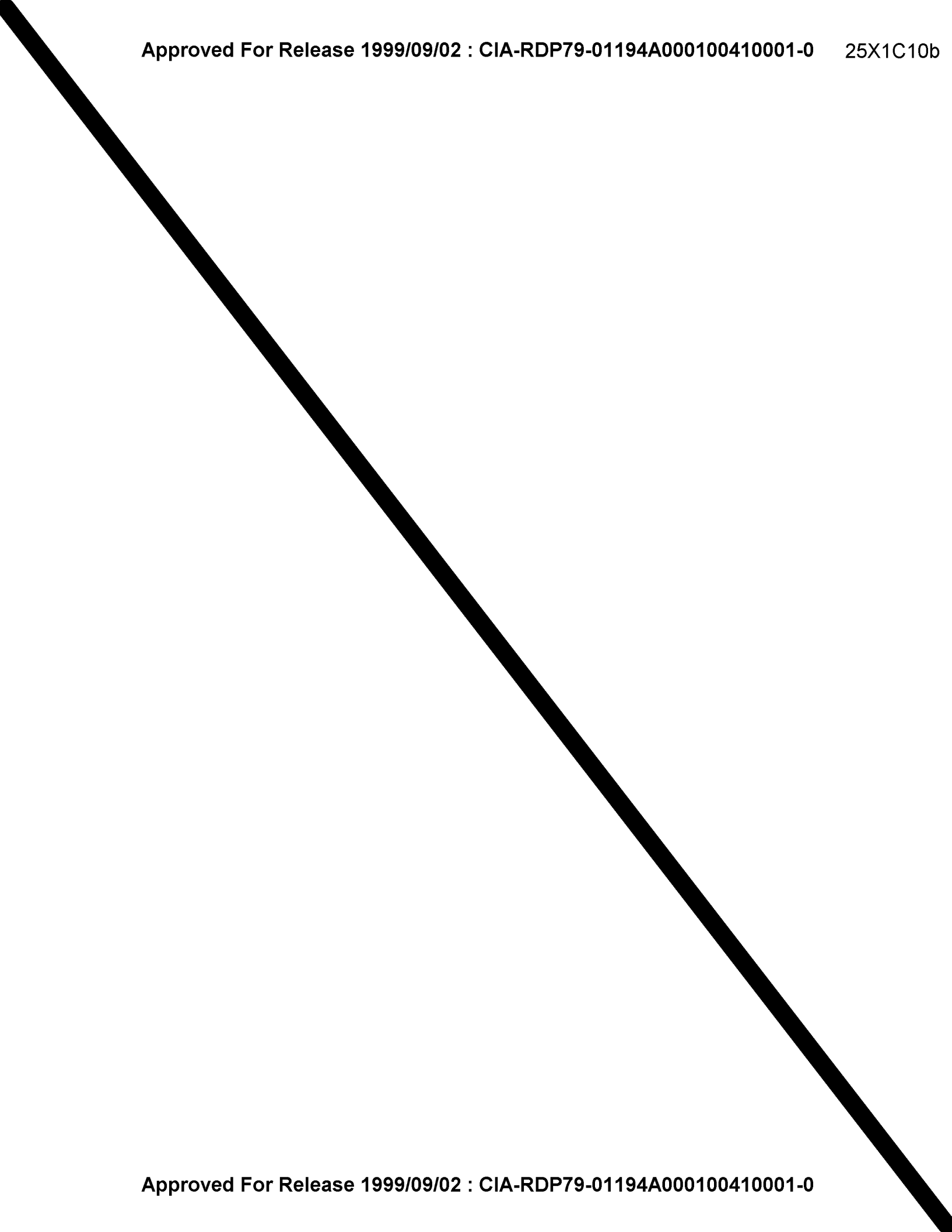


Somalia comes out of its shell

JAMES MACMANUS reports from Mogadishu on Somalia's debt to Moscow

SOMALIA'S military coup of October 21, 1969, ended nine years of democratic but chaotic post-independence Government, and introduced a period of rigorous political and economic change that few outsiders were encouraged to examine.

Five years later, President Siyad Barre's military Government is beginning to spread its wings amid quickening interest in the country's international loyalties, territorial ambitions, and internal politics.

There are two main reasons why Somalia is now coming out of its shell, as an observer in the capital Mogadishu put it. Firstly, drought has decimated the livestock herds that made up the backbone of the economy and brought famine to around one million people — one-fifth of the population if the forecast returns from the recently completed census prove correct. This has meant the need for continuing large scale international aid.

Secondly, Somalia is sensitive to charges of Soviet satellisation that have followed the heavy inflow of Russian arms and advisers. Through the Supreme Revolutionary Council, an all-military body, President Siyad has pursued a classic brand of Moscow Marxism since he came to power. Notices in every Government office proclaim that "scientific socialism" is Somalia's chosen answer to its poverty.

This, combined with a long-standing Russian commitment to create a modern Somali army, has brought a large Soviet contingent to the Horn of Africa. Although an Islamic country, Somalia is a bridge between black and Arab Africa and the Mogadishu Government is understandably anxious to demonstrate to both that it owes Moscow thanks, but not thraldom.

At it happens, the largest aid project is a Chinese roadbuilding programme which will run along the inverted arrow-shaped border with Ethiopia. But no one, not even the Dergue in Addis Ababa, is drawing cold war corollaries from that scheme.

Russia's military options in Somalia will in any case be limited by the country's acute sensitivity to the appearance, let alone the substance, of outside control. The Russian Embassy in Mogadishu is well aware that its 1,500 personnel are not particularly popular with the Somali people. When a Moscow football team visited Somalia last year the Embassy directed its residents to attend, by choice, only one of the three matches to be played. The fear was that if the entire Russian community turned up at every match the effect might be a little overwhelming for the home fans rather than the home team.

Russians are also ordered off the streets of Mogadishu during periods of tension to avoid popular abuse or physical attack. The fear is well founded: during the last Russian "vanishing act" in January an Italian was mistaken for a Russian and stabbed in Mogadishu.

The occasion was the execution of ten Moslem religious elders who saw the pagan hand of Marxism in a Government announcement that equal inheritance rights were to be given to Somali women. President Siyad Barre announced the order in a speech on January 10 which attempted to show that the new women's rights did not violate the traditionally subservient rôle reserved for women under the Islamic faith.

Twenty-three of Mogadishu's conservative sheikhs, or preachers, held that the order transgressed the spirit, if not the letter, of the Koran, and were foolish enough to say so during prayers in the city's mosques. The Government's swift response was not helped by the mid-air collision of two Russian MiG jets over the capital on the morning of the executions, January 23. A number of people saw divine retribution in the resulting deaths (at least 10) and destruction of homes as one of the jets fell into the city.

The executions revealed the efficiency of Somalia's security apparatus (the sheikhs were arrested within hours of their mosque statements), as well as the Government's ruthless behaviour towards dissidents, and the uncomfortable fact that there is some opposition, although muted, to the politics of "scientific socialism."

The executions shook Somalis and Arab diplomats in Mogadishu. In some quarters the rolling out of the firing squads was taken as a sign that the President is still unsure of his position. The speed and efficiency with which the military has consolidated its revolution, however, points to a different conclusion: that the Major-General's total control of his country's power structure led to a needless demonstration of authority.

Internally the Government is driving hard toward political goals with an enthusiasm that if anything has been deepened by Somalia's economic plight. A seven-month "crash programme" of student help in rural areas sent 35,000 Somali teenagers into remote areas to teach the new Somali script replacing a purely oral tradition, to the nomads who make up 80 per cent of the country's population.

The success of the exercise is not just that the wandering pasturalists appear to have grasped at least the essentials of the written Latin alphabet, but that a bridge has been thrown between urban socialism and a backward and fragmented rural population. This opens the way for the next step in the Supreme Council's programme — the creation of a nationwide political party to disseminate the principles of "scientific socialism."

The delay in forming a party, which elsewhere in Africa has been seen as the first step in the application of socialism, is largely due to the President's personal belief that his countrymen were sickened by what he judged to be the political feuding and corruption that attended the old multi-party system.

There seems little doubt that the Supreme Revolutionary Council is going for a broad based popular party rather than a centralised elitist structure

on the Congo-Brazzaville lines. The former invariably leads to, and depends on, the establishment of a personality cult around an identified leader.

Such a process is well under way in Somalia. It is hard to escape Sayid Barre's avuncular gaze from posters and pictures in Mogadishu. The dangers in this approach are that Somalia has evolved a remarkably egalitarian society whose lack of tribal hierarchies, although not of tribalism, has been imposed by the need to survive together in a harsh and unproductive terrain.

The push for an overall political structure has already led to a rash of orientation centres throughout the country down to village level. At open air evening sessions, traditional music is interspersed with lectures and speeches on agricultural development, health programmes, and basic Marxism.

Drought as much as revolutionary ideology has dampened the old tribal divides between the two main Somali groups — the sedentary Sab agriculturists in the South, and the wandering nomadic Samaale pasturalists in the rest of the country. Although both have a common Somali heritage, and only slightly different versions of the spoken language, their differences found political expression in rival parties after independence. Feuding between the groups, and between a host of lesser clans proved a considerable obstacle to national unity at the time of the merger between the British and Italian sectors of the country.

Tribalism is a taboo word in the new Socialist Republic, but it remains a problem as is shown by the carefully balanced clan representation on the Supreme Revolutionary Council. It is an open question whether the President's increasingly personalised leadership and doctrinaire politics will speed the process of national integration.

What can hardly be questioned is the use to which the President will put his military machine in terms of Somalia's well documented claim on the old northern frontier district of Kenya, the Ogaden triangle in Ethiopia, and French Somaliland centred on the port of Djibouti. While the expensively equipped armed forces might be a cautionary reminder to her neighbours of Somalia's new found military strength, the Government has repeatedly made clear that it will pursue territorial claims through diplomatic channels.

Even if the council were collectively seized of the desire to take the disputed territories by force, the Russians have a logistic stranglehold on the army. Counting Somalia's new tanks and planes is a fruitless exercise unless one is prepared to speculate on how many could be effectively deployed for any length of time.

Due to the hot and inhospitable terrain and around the Horn of Africa, any armoured military adventure would require the kind of back-up support which only the Russians could provide. Moscow has maintained a strict neutrality on Mogadishu's claims to a "greater Somalia." The stance has been hardened by the removal of the Ethiopian Emperor and the arrival in Addis Ababa of a Socialist military regime.

The Somalis have high hopes that the ruling military council in Ethiopia will soon see sense and negotiate about the future of the Ogaden which is almost exclusively populated by Somali nomads. Leaving aside the Derguye's violent response to Eritrean nationalism, this is wishful thinking. Traditional enmity between Somalia and Ethiopia cuts a good deal deeper than the present very approximate alignment of the two countries' Socialist philosophies. No amount of discussion will change the fact that the Ethiopian Government does not want the Somalis closer to the central Ethiopian plateau than can be helped.

This attitude does not seem to have dawned on Mogadishu yet but when it does the response is unlikely to be anything else but diplomatic. Somalia simply has too many economic problems even to contemplate armed force against her neighbours. The drought has drawn the Government into a resettlement programme for the stricken nomads that promises to be enormously expensive: that is another reason why the President is looking for help abroad while he deepens the foundations for his Socialist State at home.

Africa

THE NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY, APRIL 7, 1975

Soviet Reported Stock-Piling Missiles At African Base for Indian Ocean Ships

By DREW MIDDLETON

Defense Department officials say the Soviet Union is stockpiling long-range guided missiles in East Africa in a large newly built naval-support installation at Berbera, Somalia.

These so-called cruise missiles are believed intended for the surface ships and submarines of the Soviet squadron deployed in the Indian Ocean. The squadron, whose strength is said to vary from 10 to 15 ships, is active in the Arabian Sea, the section of the Indian Ocean east of the entrance to the Persian Gulf.

Now that the Soviet squadron is assured of rapid resupplying of its cruise missiles, a military analyst said, the Russians and their Arab friends from Iraq to Southeast Yemen could in an international crisis, control the exits from the Persian Gulf and from the Suez Canal-Red Sea supply lines. The missiles are believed to range from the SSC-1, with a range of 200 miles, to the SS-N-5 with a range of 700 miles.

The death of King Faisal, the strongly anti-Communist ruler of Saudi Arabia, the steady flow of sophisticated Soviet weapons to Iraq, Syria and Egypt and the breakdown of negotiations between Israel and Egypt has led some officials to talk of a prewar, rather than a postwar, situation.

These officials say that although there may be diplomatic advantages in slowing American arms shipments to Israel, the military fact is that Israel is the only Middle Eastern country with forces powerful enough to balance Arab strength and deter the Russians.

Military sources said that American weapons now being withheld from Israel, evidently to influence her Government to resume negotiations with Egypt, are those most necessary to a military balance.

One is the Lance surface-to-surface missile, whose sale to Israel has been approved by Congress. The Lance can be armed with either a conventional or a nuclear warhead and has a range of well over 130 miles.

Israel regards the Lance primarily as a combat-support weapon, but its deployment by the Israeli armed forces would, to some extent, balance the deployment of the longer-range SCUD-B missiles that the Soviet Union is furnishing to Egypt and Syria and, in Syria's case, manned by Russian crews.

Although Israeli teams have been receiving training in the use of the Lance at American bases, actual deliveries of the weapon are being delayed. Pentagon sources said the delay was part of Secretary of State Kissinger's attempt to force Israel to reconsider her negotiating position with Egypt.

The acquisition of the Lance is said to be more immediately important to Israel than the purchase of the Air Force's F-15 Eagle an ultramodern fighter designed to win quick air superiority over a battlefield.

The Israelis believe they need the F-15 or a comparably advanced fighter to counter the Soviet Mig-23 fighters now supplied to Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The Phantom F-4, a proved but elderly fighter, is the present Israeli mainstay.

A team of Israeli pilots and aeronautics experts, on the way to the United States to evaluate the F-15 for combat in the Middle East, was turned back and negotiations on the sale of the fighter have been suspended.

The Ford Administration has also reportedly discouraged a visit to Washington by Shimon Peres, Israel's Minister of Defense, who was expected to push for early delivery of the Lance and for progress toward a deal for a high-performance fighter aircraft.

Critics of the situation within the Defense Department argue that while the Soviet Union continues to ship advanced weapons systems to Arab countries and to build up its own military presence in the area, the United States denies arms to Israel.

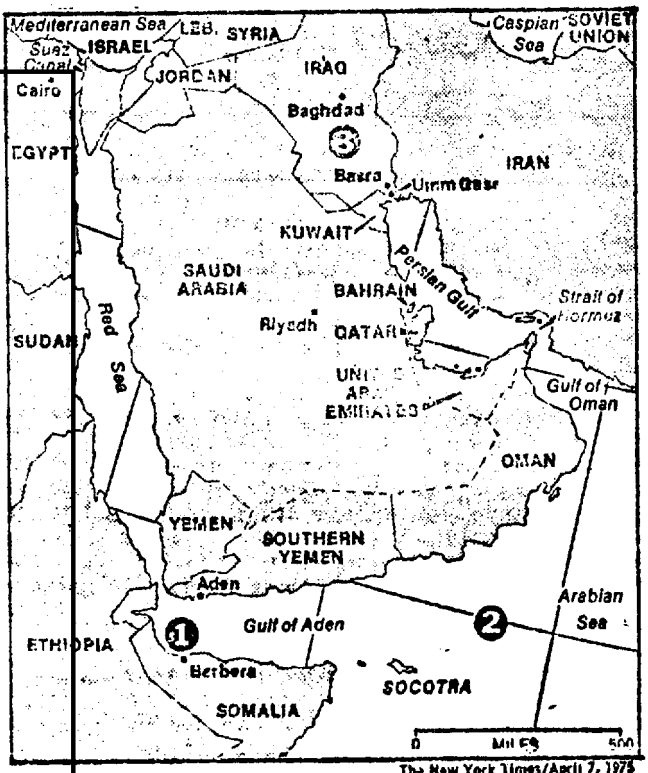
They say that this policy, if continued, would place both Israel and the United States in an awkward military situation in the event of another Arab-Israeli war. As it is, the critics said, the accumulation of Soviet and Arab military strength in the area offers the Soviet Union strategic options that would be serious challenges to both Israel and the United States in another war.

American planners say that they assume that there would be a blockade of Israel and a new oil embargo in another war.

A senior official put the question: What would happen if the Iranians defied the blockade and attempted to ship oil to Israel, and the Soviet squadron closed the Persian Gulf route to Iranian or other tankers intended for Israel?

The Russians, the official insisted, have the military strength "on the spot" to enforce a blockade.

Military planners say they are also concerned over the future policy of Iraq toward her neighbors on the Gulf. They assert that, with Soviet encouragement, Iraq might take advantage of any new crisis to move south against Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. These two rich oil-producing countries, it was noted, have maintained close economic ties with the United States and, while anti-Israeli, they are not among the "radical" Arab nations.



Soviet missiles at Berbera (1) for ships in nearby sea (2) reportedly worried some U.S. officials. They also cited possible plans of Iraq (3) in Persian Gulf area.